

Help with school costs

How to get the best out of your child's education: Help with school costs

In the UK, all children are entitled to a free education. Despite that, there are some things that parents have to pay for, such as what their children wear to school, the way they get to school and what they eat while they're at school. And for families that may be finding it hard to manage on a limited income, those costs can easily mount up and often seem unaffordable.

According to The Children's Society, too many children are missing out on the opportunity to make the most of their education because they struggle to afford the costs of school life. A report published by the charity in 2014 suggests more than two thirds of parents are struggling with the cost of school, rising to 95 per cent of parents from 'not well off' families. Perhaps that's because, on average, families spend £800 each year on school costs, the charity claims.

If you're on a low income and you have children at school, the good news is you may be entitled to some financial help with certain school costs.

Did you know?

In January 2016, 14.3 per cent of pupils were eligible for and claiming free school meals, the lowest proportion for any year since 2001 (Source: Department for Education).

What financial help is available?

Local education authorities (or Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland) offer help with certain school costs, including school meals, school milk, school clothing and school transport. Whether or not you may be entitled to any of this help will depend on your financial circumstances, but it may also depend on things like what type of school your child goes to, where your child goes to school and your child's age.

Other organisations may also offer financial help, including a school's governing body or parents' association. Details of any help that's available is usually found in the information you receive from a school, or you could approach the parents' association, governing body or head teacher direct.

Some charities also offer help in the form of grants for parents that help with the cost of sending children to school. However, charities usually have a limited amount of money they can offer in the form of grants, and this help is often restricted to specific groups, such as those living in certain areas or belonging to certain religions.

- You can find out what help may be available from charities in your area by contacting your local Citizen's Advice.

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School meals

Provision of free school meals differs slightly across the UK. However, whether you live in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, your child may be able to get free school meals if you receive any of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part V1 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (though you must not also be receiving Working Tax Credit and your income must be below a certain amount)

In England and Wales, all children in reception, year 1 and year 2 at state schools automatically get free school meals. Those who are younger than the compulsory school age and who are in full-time education may also be entitled to free school meals, as are those who go to special schools and who require a special diet (including children who are special school boarders).

In addition to the above benefits, your child may also be entitled for free school meals if you live in England or Wales and you're receiving Working Tax Credit run-on (paid for four weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit) or if you're getting Universal Credit.

Meanwhile in Scotland, the government launched the extension of free school meals to all primary year 1 to primary year 3 children in local authority (or local council) schools in 2015. Scottish parents who receive Universal Credit, or those who get the maximum Child Tax Credit and maximum Working Tax Credit and who are on a very low income (currently less than £6,420 a year), can also claim free school meals for their children.

- If you want to apply for free school meals, you should approach your local authority (search for your local authority in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland online).

School milk

In England, Scotland and Wales, all pre-school children who are under the age of five and in day care are eligible for free milk under the nursery milk scheme. In Wales, Key Stage 1 pupils are also entitled to free school milk. And in Northern Ireland, free school milk is available to all children who go to special schools, schools where meals aren't provided and to those who have a medical certificate that says milk is an important part of their diet.

Other children may be eligible for milk subsidised by the school milk subsidy scheme, which is available to schools run by local authorities. But unless your child is entitled to free school meals, you will usually have to pay for their milk. Schools and colleges that aren't maintained by local authorities may also provide milk, but their governing body will decide whether or not the school will charge for it.

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School clothing

If your child goes to a school where they have to wear a school uniform, the cost of dressing them properly can be high. But sending them to school not wearing their uniform could result in your child being excluded, either temporarily or permanently.

If you're finding it difficult to meet the cost of your child's school uniform – including their shoes and PE kit – the first thing you should do is talk to the headteacher. This could help get you some more time to buy your child the right clothes.

England or Wales

If your child goes to an education authority-maintained school, college for further education or sixth-form college in England or Wales, you can ask your local education authority if there's any help available with the cost of school clothing.

The type of help varies from one local education authority to another. Some, for instance, offer a one-time grant when a child starts school – for example in Wales, pupils eligible for free school meals who are starting secondary school can get a one-off grant. On the other hand, other local authorities make more regular payments that help as your child grows and needs bigger clothes. These grants usually come in the form of cash or as vouchers that you can use at local shops.

You may also want to find out if there's any help on offer from your school's governing body or

parents' association. Some, for instance, sell second-hand school uniforms that cost much less than new clothes.

Parents who receive certain benefits – such as Income Support, income-based Jobseekers' Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance or Pension Credit – may be able to get an interest-free budgeting loan to help with the cost of buying school clothes from the Social Fund. You can apply to the fund by downloading form SF500 from gov.uk.

Northern Ireland

Parents or guardians of children in primary, post-primary or special schools in Northern Ireland may be able to get a grant from the Education Authority in their region. Who qualifies for a grant is decided in a similar way to free school meals. Only one clothing allowance per pupil will normally be paid during the school year.

How much you may receive depends on the type of school your child is attending.

To find out how to apply for a school clothing grant in Northern Ireland, visit <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/school-uniform-and-uniform-grants>

School transport

Local education authorities have to provide free transport for children between the ages of five and 16 who go to the nearest suitable school and when the school is further away than the statutory walking distance. This distance varies between two and three miles –

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depending on what part of the country you live in, your child's age and your financial circumstances – and is measured by the shortest route a child can walk with reasonable safety.

If you live in England and are receiving the maximum Working Tax Credit or if your child is entitled to free school meals, there are other circumstances in which they may be able to get free school transport.

These include when a child is aged between eight and 11 and their school is at least two miles away; when their school is two to six miles away and they are between the ages of 11 and 16 (but only if there aren't three or more suitable schools nearer to home); and when a child aged between 11 and 16 goes to a school selected for their faith that's between two and fifteen miles away.

Even if your local education authority decides that your child isn't entitled to free school transport, it's worth asking whether they have any discretionary powers to pay for part of their travelling costs.

Forms of transport

There are several types of free transport a local education authority may provide, including school buses or coaches, or they may give your child a free bus or train pass for use on public transport. If you drive your child to school, you may receive a car allowance. Or if your child cycles to school, they may get a cycle allowance.

- To apply for free school transport for your child, contact your local authority. If you live in England or Wales, you can find out more about help that's available with the cost of school transport via your local authority website.

Other grants

Some local education authorities offer small grants for various things, including activities and items that aren't part of the school curriculum.

While the amount of money local education authorities has for these discretionary grants may not be very high, they could prove useful if your child needs help meeting the cost of travelling to an interview or with buying something like a musical instrument. Again, you can find out more about what's available in your area by contacting your local authority.

Meanwhile, if you've tried all the official sources but still can't get what you need, the Licensed Trade Charity offers help with things like school uniforms, school trips and study aids for those working in the trade who meet our employment and financial criteria. Contact us via our free helpline for more information (0808 801 0550) or email helpline@ltcharity.org.

Useful links

If you are experiencing any of the issues covered in this guide, in the first instance call our free helpline on 0808 801 0550. Our Advisors will listen without judging and will work with you as best they can to achieve a positive outcome.

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If you prefer you can email: helpline@ltcharity.org; . Visit our website: www.licensedtradecharity.org.uk; It's full of useful information about the kind of issues we know people who work in the licensed trade face.

Other sources of information

Citizens Advice

www.citizensadvice.org.uk
For free practical advice on a wide range of issues, including information on help with school costs.

Gov.uk

www.gov.uk/browse/childcare-parenting/schools-education There's also lots more information on various aspects of schools, including help with costs, on the government's website.

Shine Trust

www.shinetrust.org.uk
Funds programmes such as lessons after school, complementary classes on Saturdays and literacy, numeracy and study support sessions.

TLG

<https://www.tlg.org.uk/>
TLG is a Christian charity that runs early intervention and education centres around the country for children who have either been excluded or are at risk of being excluded from school.

Royal National Children's Foundation

www.rncf.org.uk

Provides funding to help pay fees for vulnerable children at independent and state-maintained schools.

Buttle UK

www.buttleuk.org
Offers a small grants programme and a school fees programme to help vulnerable children aged 11 and older to gain more support at school.